

PARAGON OF THE AIR

Proposal for a one-hour documentary film

This proposal is based on SODEC-funded research done in Montreal and the Eastern Townships, Quebec, as well as in Vancouver, Vancouver Island, Saltspring Island, Prince Rupert, and the Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C. The research was done over an extended period of five weeks in the months of August and September, 2001, and January, 2002.

The Raven, most powerful of all the creatures who lived during myth-time, whose whim could light the world and bring the lakes and rivers to Haida Gwaii and fill them with fish, the great transformer of himself and of the universe, the final distillation of the essence of the clever, complex, devious, ingenious, restless, contradictory human race, the many-voiced and iridescently pitch-black Raven: why is he always walking along some beach, hungry, dissatisfied? Why does he have to resort to trickery of the meanest kind in order to satisfy his desires? Well, no matter. The Raven is doomed to continue forever his restless wanderings through the world searching for something to quell his insatiable appetites for amusement and food, and inadvertently bringing a little pleasure, a little profit, and even some knowledge, to his favourite playthings, human beings.

--Bill Reid (Haida artist), "Raven Steals the Light" (Vancouver, 1984)

The raven is the paragon of the air, the brain of the bird world. No other bird has a wider distribution or shows more adaptability. Its highly glossed plumage shows iridescent greens, blues and purples, shining like a black dewdrop in the light. It has a greater variety of calls than any other animal or bird. And their dance moves me more than any human performance ever could. Ravens by the dozens, sometimes, hundreds, ride the updrafts, barrel-roll down, fly in loose formation, separating and regrouping. It's an uninhibited display of life and joy. It has been performed for millions of years and will continue for a long time to come. I hope the unfolding of raven's world will someday create a story where all data would be like flecks of paint that would, when seen in total, reveal a masterpiece of evolution.

--Bernd Heinrich (biologist), "Mind of the Raven" (New York, 1999)

I propose to make a film of homage to a bird whose intelligence, playfulness and curiosity have made it the inspiration of creation and survival myths throughout the northern hemisphere. There will be two themes: the Raven as the trickster of myth and legend, and the raven as a species of superior intelligence. The film would be a combination of actuality footage of ravens from five contrasting locations, portraits of raven-lovers in these locations, and the telling of legends to be illustrated with animated graphics.

The five locations would be Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C. (coastal rain forest), Vale Perkins, Quebec (temperate inland), Iqaluit, Baffin Island (arctic), Douantze, Mali (semi-desert), and Cornwall, England (coastal tundra). I have seen ravens in all five locations over the years, ^{and} ~~but~~ ^{done} have only been able to do research for this film in two of them--Queen Charlotte Islands and Vale Perkins. Research in the other three will have to be covered by a new budget for scripting or pre-production.

The Haida name for the Queen Charlotte Islands is Haida Gwaii. They face Prince Rupert on the west coast of British Columbia. Haida Gwaii is the most densely raven-populated area in Canada. Ravens crowd the beaches, the power lines, the fences and the roofs--wherever there are Haida settlements. They are the dominant creature in Haida carving, which has been undergoing a spectacular renaissance since Bill Reid started renewing it in the 1960s with works of high art. One of his masterpieces is called Raven and the First Men. Dominating the interior of the B.C. Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, it depicts the raven liberating the first human beings from a clam shell.

The raven is the central mythic figure in north-west native culture. A major characteristic of this mythic raven is its ability to transform itself into other life forms, including the human form. I propose to create a narration to be read by a raven in human

form. Bill Reid died in 1998, but I have met a native writer from B.C. who could reproduce his style of speaking. Lee Maracle is an established novelist who belongs to the west-coast Salish tribe. In her latest novel, "Ravensong", the raven has a speaking part and tries to guide a community through its efforts to survive.

The narrator's voice in this film would appear to be spoken by the mask of a raven who appears at a Haida ceremony. The mask would be worn by a specialized raven dancer like George Taylor, a Haida performer who lives in Victoria. A raven dancer is the only dancer at a Haida ceremony who doesn't have to follow the drum-beat or any other rules of the dance. His movements are unpredictable, and he moves with the same awkward gate as the raven, who looks like he has a "dry hip". To demonstrate his transforming powers, his long beak opens up from time to time revealing another inner mask in the form of a human face.

The raven dance will open the film, and hold the film together throughout. The narrator's voice will be heard telling the story of creation. Here is Bill Reid's version:

Before there was anything, before the great flood had covered the earth and receded, before the animals walked the earth or the trees covered the land, the world was blacker than a thousand stormy winter midnights. It slowed the Raven down a good deal in his pursuit of food and other fleshly pleasures, and in his constant effort to interfere and to change things.

Light was hidden in a box by the Sky Chief. The Raven begged in his most pitiful voice to be allowed to hold the light for just a moment. The Sky Chief lifted a bright round ball from the box and tossed it to him. The Raven snapped it in his jaws, and flew away. The world was at once transformed. The Raven flew on, revelling in the experience of being able to see where he was going. He tossed the bright ball into the sky, and landed on the North Beach. There he found a gigantic clamshell full of little creatures cowering in terror.

As you know, the Raven speaks in two voices, one harsh and strident, and the other, which he used now, a seductive bell-like croon which seems to come out of the cave where the winds are born. It is one of the loveliest sounds in the world. So it wasn't long before the little shell-dwellers timidly emerged. They were the original Haidas, the first humans.

Dissolve to an exterior of the community hall of Skidegate, to indicate the location of the dance. Skidegate is the main Haida village, situated on the shore of Hecate Strait. We see Haidas throwing the remains of cleaned fish onto the rocky beach. Ravens arrive by the dozen to pick the remains, and to dig for clam shells. Once fed, some of the ravens amuse themselves by pulling the tails of dogs in front yards, others by harassing eagles off their tree branches. Some sit on the fence of the town cemetery nearby to clean themselves, surrounded by tombstones decorated with raven carvings.

These opening scenes will introduce the film's two main themes: (1) the Raven as a figure of myth and legend, and (2) the raven as one the most intelligent predatory creatures in the northern hemisphere. The first theme will be carried by the raven dance, and a series of animated sequences inspired by it. The dance and the animation will recur throughout the film, providing the structural thread. The second theme will be carried by following a character through a series of actuality sequences to be shot in the five locations mentioned above.

The animated sequences will be grow out of sketches by a Haida artist called Michael Nicoll Yagulenaas. He will be established at the dance ceremony working on his sketch pad. He will be doing them with animation in mind, because he has taken up computer animation in Vancouver.

The main character in the actuality sequences will be Briony Penn. She is the David Suzuki of Saltspring Island--a doctor in ecology, a popular broadcaster, the mother of three school-age children, a gum-boot dancer, and the author and illustrator of a best-selling book about wildlife on the west coast. She will be established as a spectator at the dance ceremony. We will then see her walking with Michael Nicoll on the magnificent North Beach of Haida Gwaii, where Raven is supposed to have released humans from the clam shell.

Michael would be talking about how the raven dance is done mainly for the healing of the spirit.

You know, we couldn't live without the raven. He liberated light, and the funny, unpredictable tricks he plays are his way of throwing light on the dark side of life. He never allows us to take ourselves too seriously. His curiosity keeps the world turning. He is always turning over rocks to see what's underneath. Whenever my grandfather spoke as a chief, a raven always came to sit on his shoulder. The raven helped him see things in a new light, helped him break through the boundaries that kept people apart.

Briony would be talking about the pair of ravens she has befriended by laying out bits of carcass on a rock near her home in Saltspring.

They follow me whenever I go for a walk. They drop twigs and pieces of moss on my head, and entertain me with sounds like chickens, or chain saws, or running water, or cans of beer opening. Sometimes they try to sound like drunken loggers. They somehow balance the dual roles of fool and king. I have seen them take very undignified baths in the snow, and slide down snow hills on their stomachs. I have seen them grasp talons and shake in the sky. They do quick 180 degree flips and dive bomb birds of prey they dislike. I wish I could do that in some committee meetings.

Vale Perkins is a small village on Lake Memphremagog. My ancestor Nicholas Austin was the first to settle there in 1792. Like other pioneers in the Eastern Townships, he relied on the raven to help him find big game. Most of the ravens left with the moose and the wolves fifty years ago, as the area became gentrified. But a few managed to stay on here by feeding on carrion, rodents and roadkills year round, supplemented with berries, fruit, frogs and trout in the warm weather. They nest on Owl's Head, the ski hill which rises out of Vale Perkins and which dominates the western shore of Lake Memphremagog.

Briony's host here will be Blad Hanson, an ecologist with perhaps fewer academic pedigree than Briony, but with no less knowledge of the eco-system of his region, and with no less passion for the raven. He has made nature films for the NFB, but works principally now on the renovating of old farm homes around Havelock, in Monterégie, where he settled after immigrating from Scotland some 30 years ago.

There is a ^{deep}gorgeous canyon on the edge of Blad's property with a crevice in it, ^{in a crevice}where a pair of ravens have built a nest to which they return every year for breeding. Blad ~~has~~ ^{knows} found a spot across the canyon where he can observe in detail the daily lives of these ravens. He will be able to find the crevices on Owl's Head where the ravens breed, which starts in February. I want to do the breeding sequence on Owl's Head because it is just 15 kms from my cottage, so that I can easily follow the early stages of the raven's life, (from incubation in February and birth in March to leaving home six months later.) Hanson:

I think that ravens' minds are driven by more than just hormones. With a combination of voice, feather erection, and body posture, they can communicate anger, affection, hunger, curiosity, playfulness, fright, boldness, and depression. Their relationships suggest to me that they even evaluate and make choices for partners. I've seen males trying to impress particular females with full repertoires of sounds--gurgling, chortling, trilling, bill-snapping, honking,

ringing like bells--and I've seen the impressed female responding by bowing her head, elevating her wings and flaring her tail.

Briony:

I used to identify with birds like those arctic terns that race around the planet. It sort of went hand in hand with admiring Simone de Beauvoir and free love. I call those my rites of passage. My emancipation now lies in admiring the qualities of ravens. They are very loyal to one another. I think it has to do with equal parenting. I have watched a male raven chew a piece of rotting crab and soften it with rain water to take back to his young. Then he stands by them while the female goes out for a joy flight. I've got a husband like that ,

We see Briony's husband and children at the raven dance in Skidegate. The narrator is now telling the story of the flood.

Long ago, most of the land was under ice, and Raven was white and cold. Once the ice melted and there was a deluge. Many were drowned before the Great Spirit took pity and saved one male and one female of each species and put them on a raft. He asked Raven to fly over the world and look for land. But instead of doing what he was told, Raven spent all his time looking for floating corpses to eat. So the Great Spirit thought he would punish Raven by turning him to black. But that colour made it possible for Raven's body to better absorb the heat of the sun, so he was able to survive in the coldest of places, and he never returned to the raft.

The animated sequence to evolve out of Michael Nicoll's sketches of this story will show how intertwined it is with the Genesis story of the flood, in which Noah sent the raven scouting for land, and in which the bird was turned to black and condemned to eat carrion when he did not return.

We then see Briony in a land of ice. In Iqaluit, Baffin Island, ravens are as omni-present as they are in Haida Gwaii. Briony is visiting Kalingu Sataa, an Inuit stone carver and hunter. He is a character in Heinrich's "Mind of the Raven". He is very similar to characters I met when I was in Iqaluit some twenty years ago, but I took no notes then, so I quote what Kalinga said to Heinrich:

You know how ravens are fond of meat. Here in Iqaluit, they harass dogs in backyards to get it. If they cannot intercept it at the front end of the dog, they get it at the other end. They can reduce the risk of being caught by working in teams of two or three. But their preferred meat is caribou, something they cannot kill themselves. So with certain sounds, they let bears know where to find caribou. Bears will then let ravens share in the feast, and as ravens can sense danger better than bears, they will let the bears know if Inuit hunters are approaching. It is taboo for Inuit to kill ravens, because we believe the raven created light by flinging glittering mica chips into the sky, and then created humans out of rock. So we have learned how to imitate raven calls, which we use to attract bears.

Briony will try to persuade Kalingu to take her with him the next time he goes out on a hunt.

She will then be seen climbing the redstone cliffs that overlook the town of Duoantze in Mali. She is being led to the caves that are occupied by the white-necked ravens of Mali. Her guide is Mariam Ouologuem, daughter of the Dogon chief of a nearby town.

Mariam is a trained agronomist in her late thirties who works for a Canadian NGO called the Unitarian Service Committee. The USC is trying to help the Dogon people defend their towns from the expanding Sahara desert. I met Mariam when shooting a film in Duoantze five years ago with Bruce Cockburn. She speaks eloquent French, as well as Dogon and Peul. She knows all the secrets of the encroaching desert and of the surrounding cliffs.

The ravens are considered fair game in Mali because they feed on the the eggs and nestlings of other bird species, including yard chickens. So ravens keep their distance in the daytime, and can be seen doing spectacular aerobatics as they ride the air currents rising over the cliffs of Douantze.

Mariam is Muslim, like 80% of Malians, but also holds on to her people's pre-Muslim beliefs in animism, according to which every living thing represents a spiritual force. Briony will be asking Mariam to get her father, the chief, to talk about the spirit behind the raven.

An African raven story will be illustrated with an animated sequence in the style of Michael Nicoll's sketches. We will see the raven dancer telling this story, and blending it with others from around the world: the god Apollo turning Raven into the colour black for bringing the news of his wife's infidelity; Raven scouting the world for the enemies of Odin, the ruler of the Norse gods; Raven feeding the prophet Elijah during his retreat in the desert; Raven warning Cicero of his impending death; Raven's cries being simulated on the trumpets of troops in Old Ireland; Raven flying on the banners of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

We see Briony on a bird-training farm in Cornwall, in the south-west corner of England. She is visiting Rose Buck, who has trained a crane to fly beside her car when she drives to town, and to stay in the car while she does errands. She shows Briony the church steeple which is occupied by a family of wild ravens, and the garbage bins around town where they forage for food. She then takes her out to the ancient ruins of Tintagel Castle on the dramatic cliffs overlooking the Celtic Sea.

We Cornish people believe that this is Camelot, where King Arthur was born and held his court in the fifth century. You know that he disguised himself as a raven when travelling outside this castle. So for us Cornish people, Arthur lives on in raven form, and we are forbidden to kill the bird. Whereas in other parts of England, the raven's croaking is taken as a prophecy of calamity. The legend of King Arthur as a raven reflects our collective past as a species of hunters, who needed ravens as guides. They only became creatures of bad omen when we humans became gatherers and farmers, and saw ravens feed off new-born lambs, as well as off the corpses of battle and pestilence.

Rose Buck is a character discovered by Partridge Films of New York, which produced a film about Ravens in 1999. It was broadcast on PBS in December 2001. The film contains nothing about King Arthur, nothing about Africa or the Arctic, nothing about mating and breeding, and very little about native legends. If for any reason Buck is not available for my film, I would search for another English expert on ravens and King Arthur through the keeper of ravens at the Tower of London.

The film will close with the Raven dancer reading from the Bill Reid quote above, while real ravens do their own "undisputed displays of life and joy" in the skies over Skidegate, Owl's Head, Iqaluit, Douantze and Tintagel:

Raven is the great transformer of himself and of the universe, the final distillation of the clever, complex, devious, ingenious, restless, contradictory human race. The many-voiced and pitch-black Raven: he is doomed to continue forever his restless wanderings through the world, searching for something to quell his insatiable appetites for amusement and food, and inadvertently bringing a little pleasure, and even some knowledge, to us humans, his favourite playthings.

Martin Duckworth

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